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Unlikely union puts man on national team

By Maribel Villalva

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Florentino "Lico" Subia's entire life history is inside his Chihuahueta home in South El Paso.

He sits in his kitchen and points to the adjacent room where he was born. He goes to another room and pulls out a handful of legal-size envelopes with dozens of black-and-white photographs that document his days as a boxer, a Korean War veteran, a motorcyclist and a father.

But the envelope that continues to grow each year is the one with pictures of him with President Bush and first lady Laura Bush, along with Christmas cards he's received from the couple over the years. It's a friendship that began spontaneously about five years ago and changed Subia's life.

"People look at me and wonder why I'm friends with him," Subia said. "But he took a liking to me."

Subia was nominated by President Bush to the board of directors of the Legal Services Corp. -- a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing legal services to low-income people. Last weekend, Subia traveled to Washington, D.C., along with five other nominees, to meet with the board of directors.

His name has been submitted to the Senate for confirmation, and organization officials expect Subia to be approved in the next few months.

Mauricio Vivero, a spokesman for the organization, said Subia made a great impression on everyone at the meetings.

"He provided some valuable insight to us because he comes here as a representative of the people who are eligible for our services," Vivero said. "If approved, he's going to be a fresh voice and a great contributor to this board."

Subia, who quit high school at age 14 to help his family and who has never earned more than minimum wage in his life, never imagined he could one day serve on a committee at the request of the president. And while he's nervous about his new duties, it's the words then-Gov. Bush told him that give him the confidence he needs.

"He told me, 'You just keep on being Lico. You've got common sense, and those are the kind of people I like,' " Subia said.

Subia and his wife of 28 years, Mickie Subia, traveled to Washington, D.C. While Subia's trip was paid for by the organization, Mickie's was not. Friends and family pulled enough money together to send Mickie on the trip. Subia said he wanted to share the experience with his wife, and Mickie was more than happy to go.

"It felt really nice that everybody got together to do something for us," Mickie said.

Cesar Viramontes, owner of International Garment Processors in El Paso, was one of the friends who pitched in for the trip.

"Lico likes to be recognized as a biker, but I'm sure he's very happy and proud to be assigned to anything by the president," Viramontes said. "Lico can offer a lot of input from the perspective of a barrio person, and he's also someone who is always helping other people."

Subia never hides his identity. He bought a suit for the first meeting with the other board of directors, but by the second meeting, he wore the clothes all El Pasoans recognize him in: his jeans, leather jacket and bandanna.

"They got to see who I really am," he said.

A strange twist of fate

Subia's friendship with the Bushes began through a tragic event in his life -- the death of his 21-year-old son, Florentino "Nunie" Subia Jr.

It was Father's Day, 1980, and Subia got the call all parents dread. Nunie was killed instantly in a motorcycle-car accident in the Lower Valley.

"That was the hardest day of my life. I think I got all my gray hair in the two weeks after that," he said.

To memorialize his son, Subia asked his artist friend Felipe Adame to paint a mural at his home. The mural depicts two motorcycles in the back of a pickup, which is headed toward the beach.

At about the same time, El Paso gallery owner Adair Margo was involved in a Junior League of El Paso project that was documenting murals in the city, which is how she came across Lico Subia's home. Then, when Margo was giving a tour of the city's murals to then-Texas first lady Laura Bush, they stopped at the home and Bush met Subia's wife, Mickie. She returned to the home on a later visit and the first lady even tried on his leather jacket and posed for a picture on Subia's motorcycle.

When Subia finally met the governor a few days later at the Chamizal National Memorial, Subia needed no introduction.

"He told me, 'You don't have to tell me who you are. My wife told me all about you,' " he said.

Margo said both Lico and Mickie have an unforgettable quality about them, which is why the Bushes have always wanted to see them on their trips to El Paso.

"They are just who they are," Margo said. "That's why I love when things (like the nomination) happen to people who are not clamoring for it. Lico was never seeking this, but the president recognized a quality in him."

Subia acknowledges that none of this would have happened if it weren't for the mural outside his home. He said his son is looking out for him from beyond the grave.

"I would prefer to have my son alive and to be with him, but he did help open a lot of doors for me."

Subia's new role in the Legal Services Corp. will require him to work on behalf of poor citizens who are requesting legal assistance. But Subia is no stranger to helping people.

Even though he and his wife are low-income, Subia has never shied away from raising money for people less fortunate than himself.

Subia is president of a motorcycle club, the Iron Horses, which raises money year-round for a variety of causes, but mostly to help children.

"The way I see it, I got it made in the shade," he said. "There are some really needy people out there."